

The Other Side of the Khashoggi Tragedy

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It is hard at this point to believe that Saudi Arabia did not kill Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi and then try to make him disappear-- although it seems as likely that this was as much the result of a botched kidnapping or a too violent interrogation as a deliberate killing. It is equally hard to find any aspect of Khashoggi's life that justified even the kind of forced detention or interrogation that might have led to his unintentional death. All the public data on him to date indicates that he stood for the same values that Americans tend to take for granted.

His ties to the Muslim Brotherhood do not seem to have involved any links to extremism. His criticisms of the Saudi government seem to have been limited to the kinds of reforms the Kingdom will eventually have to make. In fact, a more enlightened and pragmatic Saudi Crown Prince might have seen them as actually helping in the near term by acting as a counter weight to the hardline Saudi conservatives that challenge every step forward.

Allowing legitimate criticism is not a luxury for any government seeking true reform it is a critical way of countering reactionaries, of building support for change, and learning what all of the people-- especially a nation's moderate elite actually thinks.

A Saudi Failure to Even Serve Its Own Narrow Security Interests

Even if one could ignore issues like human rights and the rule of law, any Saudi government overreaction to Khashoggi failed to meet the most critical pragmatic tests that any national security action must meet: Publically repressing Khashoggi was unnecessary, counterproductive, and *stupid*. The human equivalent of "catch and release" would have been bad enough. Killing him deliberately or accidentally was truly idiotic. What could anyone in the Saudi royal court or intelligence possibly have expected the end result to be?

Even worse, MBS and the top levels of the Saudi government should already have learned the risks such repression poses to Saudi Arabia and their rule. The previous global reaction to Saudi hardline treatment of female protesters, the quiet anger among Western intelligence and security officials over the way Muhammed bin Nayef was dismissed, the reaction to the Saudi-UAE boycott of Qatar, the hotel arrests, and the growing problems over bombings in Yemen, should all have been warnings. Pointless overreaction creates far more hostility outside a country than it is worth, and even internally, it generally does more to alienate than successfully repress.

But Turkey, to Put It Mildly, is No Better

That said, some aspects of the U.S. and Western reactions to what seem to be serious Saudi mistakes have been dangerously ingenuous. The more one looks at Turkey's actions in dealing with Khashoggi, the more obvious it is that Turkey has managed to play a good part of the Western media.

First, this is the same Erdogan government that was described as follows in the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report issued in April 2018, and in ways that make it clear that Turkey was actively repressing far more people than Saudi Arabia.

The country experienced significant political challenges during the year. The continuing state of emergency--imposed following the July 2016 coup attempt, renewed once in 2016 and an additional four

times during the year--had far-reaching effects on the country's society and institutions, restricting the exercise of many fundamental freedoms. By year's end authorities had dismissed or suspended more than 100,000 civil servants from their jobs, arrested or imprisoned more than 50,000 citizens, and closed more than 1,500 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on terrorism-related grounds since the coup attempt, primarily for alleged ties to cleric Fethullah Gulen and his movement, whom the government accused of masterminding the coup attempt.

The most significant human rights issues included alleged torture of detainees in official custody; allegations of forced disappearance; arbitrary arrest and detention under the state of emergency of tens of thousands, including members of parliament and two Turkish-national employees of the U.S. Mission to Turkey, for alleged ties to terrorist groups or peaceful legitimate speech; executive interference with independence of the judiciary, affecting the right to a fair trial and due process; political prisoners, including numerous elected officials; severe restriction of freedoms of expression and media, including imprisonment of scores of journalists, closing media outlets, and criminalization of criticism of government policies or officials; blocking websites and content; severe restriction of freedoms of assembly and association; interference with freedom of movement; and incidents of violence against LGBTI persons and other minorities. (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm>) .

This is not a region where most governments hesitate to eliminate legitimate opposition elements, but the State Department scarcely implies that Turkey is falling behind in the comparative body count, or shown any more concern for its prisoners than Saudi Arabia seems to have shown for Khashoggi:

Human rights groups documented several suspicious deaths of detainees in official custody, although overall numbers varied. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (HRFT) reported at least 10 deaths in prison, including those of three children. The Human Rights Association (HRA) reported 17 deaths in prison. The Ministry of Justice, responding to questions from CHP member of parliament Baris Yardakas, reported that 66 prisoners committed suicide in 2016, 40 of them after the July 2016 attempted coup. For example, on August 3, Davut Turkel, a 59-year-old laborer and member of the AKCA-DER labor union, died in police custody. On July 13, police raided his home and detained him along with 90 others, reportedly as part of a Gulen-related investigation into the 2016 attempted coup. Following 12 days in detention, he was injured prior to appearing before a judge, transferred to a hospital, and died nine days later after falling into a coma. Police claimed he fell down on the courthouse steps and injured his head. A hospital autopsy confirmed the cause of death was a brain hemorrhage. Critics asserted the death was suspicious, in view of the fact that Turkel was at the courthouse with a two-person police escort when he sustained his injuries. (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm>) .

Disappearances are no less common in Turkey than Saudi Arabia,

There were some unconfirmed reports of disappearances during the year, some of which human rights groups alleged were politically motivated. Opposition politicians and respected human rights groups claimed at least 11 abductions or disappearances of individuals with alleged Gulen ties or who opposed the government occurred. For example, in June the 12-year-old son of agricultural engineer Cemil Kocak witnessed the disappearance of his father in Ankara after their vehicle was hit by another car. When Kocak exited the car to assess the damage, three persons forced him into another car and drove away. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), there were "credible grounds" to believe Kocak and at least three other men had been forcibly disappeared by government agents. (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm>) .

And when it comes to freedom of the press:

Many in media reported the government's prosecution of journalists representing major independent newspapers and its jailing of scores of journalists during the preceding year hindered freedom of speech and that self-censorship was widespread amid fear that criticizing the government could prompt reprisals.

Hundreds of individuals, including journalists and minors, were indicted for insulting the president, prime minister, or state institutions. For example, on March 22, Ali Gul, an Istanbul law school student, was arrested and charged with insulting the president after he prepared a short video on social media regarding why Turks should vote "no" in the April constitutional referendum. He remained in jail for two months. In June the

Ministry of Justice announced that in 2016 it had tried 3,658 persons on charges related to insulting the president. Comprehensive figures for the year were unavailable at year's end.

Estimates of the number of journalists in jail varied. The Committee to Protect Journalists claimed that as of December 13, there were at least 81 journalists in prison. On December 6, the Journalists' Union of Turkey claimed 149 journalists were in prison; Reporters without Borders reported that, as of October 24, there were more than 100 journalists in jail; the NGO Platform for Independent Journalism (P24) reported that, as of November 28, there were 153 journalists, editors, or media managers in jail, the vast majority for alleged ties to the PKK or the Gulen movement.

As of May, an estimated additional 123 journalists were outside the country and did not return due to fear of arrest, according to the Journalists Association. Hundreds more remained out of work after the government closed media outlets allegedly affiliated with the PKK or the Gulen movement as part of the previous year's government response to the attempted coup. On July 20, the Radio and Television Supreme Board revoked the licenses of five television stations for broadcasting inappropriate content. Another television station and 12 radio stations that previously had their licenses revoked under a July 2016 decree faced difficulty seeking redress and were unable to appeal to the Commission of Inquiry on Practices under the State of Emergency, which was established to review appeals by individuals and associations.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals in many cases could not criticize the state or government publicly without risk of civil or criminal suits or investigation, and the government restricted expression by individuals sympathetic to some religious, political, or cultural viewpoints. At times many who wrote or spoke on sensitive topics or in ways critical of the government risked investigation.

... Nearly all private Kurdish-language newspapers, television channels, and radio stations remained closed on national security grounds under government decrees.

Government prosecution of independent journalists limited media freedom throughout the year. The pretrial detention since October 2016 of 20 prominent journalists, editors, and staffers of the country's leading independent newspaper *Cumhuriyet* continued. Prosecutors alleged that material in the newspaper dating to 2014 aided a variety of terrorist organizations, including the PKK, the Gulen movement, and the leftist Revolutionary People's Liberation Party or Front, and sought prison sentences ranging from seven and a one-half to 43 years. As of December 14, four employees remained in pretrial detention, some for more than 400 days. (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm>) .

Getting Played by Turkey????

In fairness, to both Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the same State Department Human Rights Report (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2017/index.htm>) shows they have plenty of company -- both in the region and the world. It is business as usual for some members of Congress to ignore this fact, and the number of other cases affecting America's security partners in the world, but the U.S. has to operate in the world that actually exists and not the world that should exist. And here, it is a good idea for both the American media and American politicians to pause for a moment and consider the extent to which the Erdogan government just played them to its advantage.

Anyone who and reviews the flood of articles and OPEDs on Khashoggi is going to find ample evidence that far too many journalists, Western politicians, and analysts failed to publically note that Turkey's real motive for providing an immense amount of data was to attack Saudi Arabia's position and seek to undermine its influence relative to Turkey -- as well as improve its own position in the United States.

Turkish media and voices with clear links to a government that is as repressive as the government in Saudi Arabia were rarely clearly identified having such links. Moreover, there was remarkably little coverage of the fact that Turkey was providing a level of surveillance and intelligence data on Saudi activity that could only come if Turkey was maintaining the kind of intelligence effort

one only applies to a hostile power or was hoping use some form of Khashoggi incident for its own benefit.

Every article on Turkish sources and actions should have noted how unusual such a flood of sensitive data was, and how hypocritical any Erdogan government concern with human rights was, and the extent on Erdogan control over every aspect of Turkish government *and media* reporting. It should have highlighted the level of Turkey's interest in demonstrating Turkey's strategic importance to the U.S. and improving relations was given its economic crisis and developments in Syria. It should have highlighted the probable reason why Turkey released Pastor Brunson after two years of treating him as a pawn. It should have highlighted Turkish-Saudi differences over influence in the Middle East, , how to promote Sunni Islam, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran the Kurds, and Iraq.

Giving the Khashoggi Case the Right Follow-Up

Finally, again assuming that the facts that have surfaced to date are right, the best memorial to the Khashoggi is not going to be a narrow short-term focus on this case or any given country. What is needed as a memorial is a broader and lasting effort.

Doing long articles and media series on human rights that highlight a range of worst country cases and keep the pressure up over time is the best way to pressure a range of countries and warn states what will happen if they move to extremes. Avoiding focusing on one country because that is today's headline is another. Letting sources create uncertain or false ties between a journalist and terrorism/extremism is a third. But, also honestly identifying journalists who are biased, ideologues, or for sale is equally critical.

One key lesson for all forms of media --and for think tanks and government reporting in countries lucky enough to be free -- is to always identify the range of countries in suppressing or attacking freedom of speech and the press in a given case -- not just the specifics of a single incident. Fully covering State Department, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International reporting on regional and the broader patterns of repression -- rather than simply covering incidents as they occur -- is another. Honestly explaining the real world nature of allies and partners in international relations, and the hard choices the U.S. sometimes has to make, is equally necessary.

A spasm of reporting on Khashoggi, and a flood of OPEDs dumping on Saudi Arabia-- followed by a lack of in depth coverage of the problem -- is no memorial to someone who seems to have died for trying to speak the truth.